

THE HOUNDS OF
AVALON

Also by Mark Chadbourn

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The Dark Age:

The Devil in Green

The Queen of Sinister

The Hounds of Avalon

The Age of Misrule:

World's End

Darkest Hour

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Underground

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THE
DARK AGE
3

THE HOUNDS OF
AVALON
MARK CHADBOURN



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Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228-2119

VOICE: 716-691-0133

FAX: 716-691-0137

WWW.PYRSE.COM

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For Betsy, Joe, and Eve

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CHRONICLES OF THE FALLEN WORLD

One night, the world we knew slipped quietly away. Humanity awoke to find itself in a place mysteriously changed. Fabulous Beasts soared over the cities, their fiery breath reddening the clouds. Supernatural creatures stalked the countryside—imps and shape-shifters, blood-sucking revenants, men who became wolves, or wolves who became men, sea serpents and strange beasts whose roars filled the night with ice; and more, too many to comprehend. Magic was alive and in everything.

No one had any idea why it happened—by order of some Higher Power, or a random, meaningless result of the shifting seasons of Existence—but the shock was too great for society. All faith was lost in the things people had counted on to keep them safe—the politicians, the law, the old religions. None of it mattered in a world where things beyond reason could sweep out of the night to destroy lives in the blink of an eye.

Above all were the gods—miraculous beings emerging from hazy race memories and the depths of ancient mythologies, so far beyond us that we were reduced to the level of beasts, frightened and powerless. They had been here before, long, long ago, responsible for our wildest dreams and darkest nightmares, but now that they were back they were determined to stay forever. In the days after their arrival, as the world became a land of myth, these gods battled for supremacy in a terrible conflict that shattered civilisation. Death and destruction lay everywhere.

Blinking and cowed, the survivors emerged from the chaos of this Age of Misrule into a world substantially changed, the familiar patterns of life gone: communications devastated, anarchy raging across the land, society thrown into a new Dark Age where superstition held sway. Existence itself had been transformed: magic and technology now worked side by side. There were new rules to observe, new boundaries to obey, and mankind was no longer at the top of the evolutionary tree.

A time of wonder and terror, miracles and torment, in which man's survival was no longer guaranteed.

chapter one

CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

"These are the times that try men's souls."

Thomas Paine

The final days of the human race started as they would end, with sapphire lightning bolts lashing back and forth across a stark hall. It appeared to the assembled group that a furious electrical storm was raging within the room, the air suffused with the smell of burned iron. Eyes shielded from the glare by sunglasses, the four men and one woman stood in awe behind the Plexiglas screen. They had the universe in their hands and they knew it.

Standing at the back of the group was Hal Campbell, at first ignored, now forgotten. Twenty-eight years old, bag carrier, coffee maker, officially titled chief clerk to the Ministry of Defence. Bookish, quiet, and always watchful, sometimes Hal was happy in the obscurity with which nature had blanketed him; at others, he yearned to be involved in the great affairs he saw around him every day. But he knew it would never happen; there was no bigger barrier to this than his character, which shunned risk, wallowed in nostalgia, was overly sentimental and romantic, and found security in the routine. After seven years climbing the career ladder in a world of quiet voices and filing cabinets, he knew he had now reached as high as he could go.

Another bolt of energy almost crashed against the Plexiglas window and the front line of viewers took a step back as one, before laughing nervously. Hal observed their faces, transformed into fantastic visages by the shifting shadows of the flashing blue light.

At the front, exuding authority, was the General. He was known simply by that title as if there was only one, but his full name was Clive Parsifal Morgan. Though in his late fifties, he still maintained the boyish, floppy haircut and superior demeanour he had developed at public school, honed at Welbeck College, and turned into a fine art at Sandhurst. "He's coming," he said simply.

"How can you tell? I can't see anything past all that damned flashing." David Reid pressed his sunglasses against the bridge of his nose and leaned toward the protective window. As he did so, his jacket fell open and Hal caught a glimpse of Reid's handgun in its holster. Slicked-back black hair, piercing blue eyes, expensive dark suit.

Still thinks he's James Bond, Hal thought.

Next to Reid, Catherine Manning stood icily aloof. Hal knew she'd been an investment banker in the city before the Fall; not much call for her occupation since the crash, but somehow she'd managed to find a place in the re-formed government. Hal was impressed by her always impeccable appearance, long black hair gleaming, lips and eyes made-up despite the increasing rarity of any beauty products. She wore a smart pinstripe jacket and skirt, and standing next to Reid, Hal noted how alike they were in manner and dress.

The final observer was the government's chief scientist, Dennis Kirkham. Hal knew little about his past, but Kirkham was certainly well respected in current government circles. He was a grey-faced man, quiet and intense, his thick glasses magnifying an unblinking stare that made Hal uneasy.

All eyes were fixed on the giant bluestone that dominated the hall. Proud and inspiring even torn from its context, it was still covered in lichen and clods of earth from Stonehenge. Hal couldn't help feeling a twinge of sadness to see it there. For around four thousand years it had stood guard over Salisbury Plain, but once the higher authorities had decided that they had another use for it, it had been uprooted and transported unceremoniously to its new location.

His attention was suddenly jerked from the megalith to the depths of the light display. In the infinite blue, he could have sworn he fleetingly saw a face looking back at him. Even more disturbing, it appeared to have his own features. Hal knew it was just a trick of the coruscating energy at play, but even so it left him with cold sweat trickling down his back.

"He's there, I tell you." The General tapped forcefully on the Plexiglas shield. "Can't you see his outline coming through? Over there?"

Everyone turned their attention to the few pieces of electrical equipment that had been used to jump-start the bluestone's residual energy. The red and green lights of a computer terminal were just visible through the sizzling blue glare.

Hal still couldn't see anything, but Catherine Manning had become animated. "Yes—I see him! He's made it!"

"Let's not get too excited yet," Kirkham cautioned, his face set. Of all of them, he was the one who most understood the risks. Hal recalled Kirkham's briefing when Glenning had been selected. They had laughingly dubbed Glenning "the Psychonaut," a name that had since buckled under the weight of its own accumulated mythology.

"The chances are you may not be coming back," Kirkham had warned Glenning as they stood before the lecture hall whiteboard covered with Kirkham's convoluted diagrams. "The knowledge encoded in all the old stories makes it quite clear what will happen to mortals who venture where they shouldn't."

Hal was jolted from his memory by a shimmer of blue light in the shape of a man near the spot the General had indicated.

“Yes!” Catherine said, her fists bunched in triumph.

“Phasing in,” Kirkham muttered to himself. He checked the set of monitors on the desk next to him. “Ozone level high. Ultrasound. EMF spiking. This is it.”

“So you don’t have to be at one of the nodes after all,” Reid mused. “As long as you can manipulate that energy, you can do it anywhere. Think of the implications.”

“Yes, just think,” the General said sardonically, “all you need is a four-ton megalith strapped to your back.”

A soundless explosion of blue light forced them to shield their eyes despite their sunglasses. When it cleared, the crackling bolts of lightning had gone and Glenning was standing near the bluestone, still wearing his RAF thermal flight suit. Hal could instantly see that something was wrong. The pilot was shaky on his feet, disoriented, his skin as pale as snow. But it was his eyes that would haunt Hal in the coming months. Buried in their depths was a terror so vast that it appeared to be consuming Glenning from within. This was a man who had personally seen the very depths of hell, someone who knew that his life was already over and that what was to come would be worse.

Glenning stared at them all through the Plexiglas window and desperation carved its way into his face. He reached out one arm, opened his mouth to plead, and then he simply . . . disintegrated. It was as though, Hal mused later, he had been a statue carved out of sand, collapsing under its own weight. A pile of grey dust was all that remained in the sterile atmosphere of the hall.

Hal couldn’t quite believe what he had seen. One second Glenning had been there, living and breathing and human, and then, unbelievably, he wasn’t. Hal’s mind rebelled at what his eyes were telling it. Gradually, though, his incredulity became dismay at the loss of a man in such an inhuman way.

“Another failure,” Kirkham said levelly, checking his monitors.

Jubilation drained from Catherine Manning’s face, leaving behind a sickened horror. “Oh my God,” she said, her voice dry. “What’s happened to him?”

“The only way we’re ever going to cross over is by defeating that fatal flaw in our makeup that self-destructs whenever we try to pass through the barrier,” Kirkham continued, ignoring the question.

“We know that some people can do it,” the General said. “We need to find out what they’ve got that we haven’t.”

“Gladly,” Kirkham said, “if we had one I could examine.”

“What about Glenning?” Hal couldn’t take his eyes off the pile of dust.

“Yes, poor bastard,” Reid replied. “Somebody is going to have to tell his wife.”



In his office filled with antique furniture and books that had not been opened for many a year, the General lit a small black cigar and offered the others whisky from a crystal decanter. Hal distributed the drinks on a tarnished silver tray.

"I don't believe we can afford to wait any longer, General," Reid said once they were all seated around the large desk. Hal retired to a shadowy corner, invisible but watching.

"I agree." The General swirled the amber liquid in his glass and then inhaled the honeyed fragrance. "Thought so for a while now, to be honest. But as you know, the PM is a cautious man."

"There's no great urgency," Catherine Manning said. "They've left us alone in recent months. In fact, intelligence hasn't reported any sightings of them anywhere." She looked to Reid for confirmation.

"Make no mistake, the Tuatha Dé Danann are still out there." Reid had a file filled with the latest briefings from his men and women out in the communities. "And the things that came along with the old gods are certainly still a threat. Villages in the Yorkshire Dales being terrorised by some creature that turns people to stone. Something with blades for hands cutting people up in Liverpool. The National Parks, the fells and fens—whole swathes of the country inaccessible unless you've got a squadron of heavily armed men—"

"The Tuatha Dé Danann are the root of it all," the General said firmly. "Without them, none of these other things would be here."

"But we're still not adequately equipped to fight them," Manning protested. "How can we be expected to go up against gods—"

"They are not gods," the General stressed. "Uneducated, barbaric peasants centuries ago might have thought them gods when the Tuatha Dé Danann first ventured here, but we're above such primitive nonsense. Yes, they have immense power. Yes, they can do things beyond our current understanding. But they are *not* gods. And they can be defeated. We have to use our intelligence, our resilience, and the other abilities given to us by Himself. The real God?"

Manning sipped her drink quietly, but Hal could tell that she was not convinced.

The General turned to Kirkham. "Review what we know."

"Einstein postulated the idea of a parallel universe . . . other dimensions. Of course, they've always existed in myth. The home of the gods. Asgard. Avalon. Now we know, in this as in so many other ways, that the old stories have a greater degree of truth in them than we suspected. But the roots are also there in solid science—"

"You're not about to go off on one of your interminable incomprehensible rambles, are you?" Reid said wearily. The General waved him quiet.

Kirkham was unperturbed by the interruption. "It all comes down to string

theory. Complicated physics, I know, but bear with me. In nineteen ninety-five, Edward Witten at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study came up with what he called M-theory, which implies the existence of higher dimensional shapes called membranes, or branes for short.” Kirkham, as always, was not about to be rushed—or deterred. “Branes can be as large as a universe. Indeed, a brane might even *be* a universe, and we could be living in one right now.”

“And the point is?” Reid enquired rudely.

“The point is that reality is not as clear cut as we were taught growing up. Witten described string theory as ‘twenty-first-century physics that fell by chance into the twentieth century.’ We’re at the cutting edge of science here. Is the Otherworld of Celtic mythology another brane? Are the gods the inhabitants of that brane, as we are of this one? Is it possible to *leak* between the two in the same way that M-theory suggests happens to excess gravity strength?”

“Bottom line: you still believe we can find a way through to their homeland?” the General asked.

“We know that the Tuatha Dé Danann can cross over at will,” Kirkham replied. “We also know that some human beings can pass back and forth, albeit only at certain locations. The mechanism is not clear at the moment, but with enough time and resources—”

“You’ll get all the resources you require,” the General said. “Time is a different matter. The Tuatha Dé Danann may have left us alone since the Battle of London, but we have still been invaded. The country is under enemy control, and we have no idea when they will attempt to begin cleansing. We’ve waited long enough already.”

“Sir?” Hal ventured. The others looked up sharply—they’d forgotten he was still there. “Shouldn’t we be working alongside those who fought off the original invasion at the Fall . . . the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons? From the intelligence we’ve gathered, we know they can cross over without any harm.”

“I’ve been asking for one of them to question for a long while,” Kirkham said to the group, his frustration plain.

“Are we sure they’re not just urban legends?” Manning asked. “I mean, five men and women—in what, their twenties?—who somehow mysteriously banded together and stopped the invasion from crushing us completely?”

“How do you think the invasion was stopped at the Fall?” the General said. “It wasn’t us. Our forces were paralysed . . . decimated. Why did the gods decide to sneak off into the woodwork after the Battle of London, when they’d already demonstrated that they could wipe us out any time they wanted?”

“Yes, but five people,” Manning continued incredulously. “I’ve heard the stories the same as you—”

“Oh, they exist all right,” Reid said. “We had two under surveillance at Sal-

isbury, but they've since eluded us. The Five who fought at the fall were Jack Churchill, an archaeologist; Ruth Gallagher, a lawyer; Ryan Veitch, a career criminal; and Laura DuSantiago and someone who went by the name of Shavi, two aimless drifters, no more than that as far as we can tell. Not exactly hero material, is it? They were empowered in some way by that blue energy we saw down in the lab."

Kirkham nodded in agreement. "Can't explain that at all. It seems to have come with the Fall."

"After the Battle of London," Reid continued, "the ones who survived disbanded, drifted off. The information I have is that a new Five is now in the process of being formed—the two we were observing in Salisbury were the first of the new group." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Apparently that blue energy is supposed to . . . choose these . . . champions. Seems to have a thing about the number five, too."

Manning snorted at the implication in Reid's words.

"What about the original Five?" the General said.

"Two of them are believed dead," Reid replied. "The two women are missing. The fifth is located at some college for mystical loons in Glastonbury."

"So why haven't you picked him up if you know where he is?" Manning asked. Hal noted her barely restrained pleasure at Reid's discomfort.

Reid set his jaw. "We've sent out several operatives to contact the individual, but none has returned."

The General sat back in his chair, smoking thoughtfully. "This new group . . . there're just two of them so far?"

"There's been no sign of any others as yet," Reid confirmed. "We've got people stationed at all the liminal zones—the standing stones, the henges, the ancient sacred sites—just in case anyone attempts to cross over. I've heard nothing."

"What is all this nonsense?" Manning asked. "Five champions? Somehow I can deal with the notion of an invasion of extraterrestrial biological entities, but this . . . it's like living in a bloody fairy tale."

"Come on," Reid said impatiently. "No one knows what we're really dealing with here. Suddenly there are all these new rules."

"We need to get hold of those two you were observing in Salisbury immediately," the General said.

"Yes, sir." Reid shifted uncomfortably in his chair; clearly he didn't think it was going to be as easy as the General was implying.

"Finally," Manning said. "If these Brothers and Sisters of Dragons do know how to cross over, perhaps we can actually show the Tuatha Dé Danann that we've got some teeth."

“That is my intention, Ms. Manning,” the General said. “I’m going to the PM with a new proposal. We’ve had our heads down for far too long. This is the time for action.” He turned to Hal. “Mr. Campbell? Find Hunter. He should put a team together immediately.”

“I’ll tell him at once, sir.” Hal slipped out quietly, anticipation mingling with queasy apprehension. This was it, then: the war was finally about to be launched.

The Oxford night was balmy as the heat of the June day gradually leaked away. Hal made his way from the Ministry of Defence offices and staff apartments at Magdalen College into the cool dark of the ancient Deer Park. It was a walk he took every night to clear his head. He loved Magdalen—its near-six-hundred-year history, the Great Tower, the chapel, the cloisters, so beautiful in the snow—but sometimes the tiny rooms and ancient corridors grew claustrophobic: too much gossip, too much back-stabbing, too many rumours.

Whichever way he looked at it, though, Oxford was still better than London. All the old colleges now housed the government departments that had fled the capital during the Fall. They still inhabited the same grandeur they had all enjoyed in Whitehall and the Palace of Westminster, but it felt like a fresh start; and that was a good thing.

As he slipped off his shoes to feel the deer-cropped grass, the shock of Glenning’s death finally hit him hard and he took a deep, juddering breath, throwing his head back to stare at the sky. The stars were comforting, but after all they had been through so were the city’s streetlights and the golden electric lamps that still blazed in many of the windows around the college.

“Amazing, isn’t it?”

Startled, Hal spun around to find Samantha standing behind him, hands on hips, smiling in the way that always made his spine tingle. Her ash-blond hair was tied back with an elastic band and she was dressed in a well-worn T-shirt and a pair of tracksuit trousers. The sweat of her run still gleamed on her forehead.

“You’re jumpy,” she said, laughing.

“Had a bit of a shock earlier.” Hal took another deep breath to calm his thumping heart.

“And I don’t suppose you can tell me about it. Ultra-top secret, as usual.”

“You know how it is.” Hal shifted uncomfortably; he wished he *could* tell her. Glenning’s death was one thing he desperately needed to get off his chest.

“It is amazing, though, isn’t it?” Samantha moved closer to Hal, and he was suddenly aware of the not-unpleasant aroma of her sweat mixed with the fragrance of whatever perfume, shampoo, or other aromatic she used. “Electric lights. A few years back, you’d never have thought what a wonder they would be.”

“They still are for most of the country. Mustn’t forget we’re only blessed with them here because it’s the new seat of government—”

Samantha laughed again.

“What?” Hal’s cheeks coloured.

“*Blessed with them*, indeed. You talk so strangely sometimes.” She was still smiling when she slipped an arm around his waist and gave him a gentle squeeze. A different kind of heat ran into Hal’s face. “Don’t get me wrong—I love it. You’re a breath of fresh air around here, Hal.”

Hal would have liked to respond—with an arm around her waist, perhaps a kiss—but it wasn’t the time. It never was, and a part of him wondered if it ever would be.

“Any idea where Hunter is holed up?” he asked, changing the subject.

Samantha rolled her eyes. “Let’s draw up a list of the worst dives in Oxford and I’ll guarantee he’s in one of them. He’s banned from all the good places. I heard he was thrown out of Stanyard’s last week.”

Hal nodded. “Caught in one of the toilet cubicles with a girl . . . by her boyfriend. Between them they wrecked the place before the landlord managed to toss them out.”

“And the government wouldn’t be here if not for his strong right arm,” Samantha said sarcastically. “That’s what he tells all those floozies. And they all fall for it.”

“You don’t like him very much, do you?”

“I loathe him. And I can’t understand why you’re his friend. Not in a million years. What have you ever got in common?”

“I ask myself that some days.” Hal glanced up just as a shooting star burned its path across the arc of sky visible above the city lights. “See that?” he said. “It’s an omen.”

Samantha grew serious. “The fight-back starts soon?”

“You know I can’t answer that.” Hal looked toward the dark, unruly city beyond the grand, historic colleges. “I’d better find Hunter and drag him out of whatever mess he’s got himself into this time.”

“OK, Hal. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Samantha gave him another warm smile before jogging off. Hal watched her until she disappeared into the shadows. A braver man would already have made his move, but Hal couldn’t until he was sure 100 percent that she wouldn’t say no. Deep in his head, he’d always considered himself a romantic, a counterbalance to a life lived in the dusty here-and-now to which he had been consigned; or rather, to which he had consigned himself. And he’d known pretty early on in their friendship that Samantha was the only one who could truly make him happy; not love at first sight, exactly, but near as dammit.

The first time Hal had seen her, she had been giving her lunchtime sandwich

to a young girl begging on the side of the street. When Hal mentioned it to her later, Samantha had denied her act of charity, which had only intrigued him more. But the one moment—the one shining moment that had changed everything for him—had been in some dingy bar after work when, drunk and argumentative, she'd clubbed Hunter around the head and then, minutes later, given an a cappella version of "California Dreamin'" that had sent shivers down his spine. There was no reason why it should have affected him so deeply; but it had been an alchemical experience, fuelled by magic and mystery in the banal crucible of everyday existence.

He would never forget how she'd made that gold from the base lead of his life; it was too valuable ever to risk losing.

The brothel on St. Michael's Street had become a thriving if frowned-upon establishment ever since the new government had moved to Oxford and saved the city from ruin. From the outside, the building looked abandoned, but the majority of government employees knew its location, and for many of the men in the lower ranks it provided a welcome release from the numerous pressures of trying to lead a country thrown back to the Dark Ages.

Hal knocked discreetly on the unmarked door, which was opened by an elderly lady with an ice-cream-cone mound of white hair piled on her head and a little too much makeup on her face. "Is Hunter here, Mrs. Damask?" he asked.

"Yes, Jeffrey's inside," Mrs. Damask replied in her lyrical Scottish brogue. "Would you like to wait for him?"

"You know he doesn't like to be called Jeffrey," Hal said as he entered the baroque entrance hall with its atmosphere of incense and classical music playing quietly in the background.

"And that's why we call him it," Mrs. Damask whispered with a conspiratorial wink.

She led Hal up three flights of stairs to a long corridor with doors on either side; various human noises of pleasure and pain emerging from behind several of them. Mrs. Damask motioned to a row of chairs where Hal could wait. Once she had gone, Hal listened self-consciously at Hunter's door and when he was sure there was no activity within, he knocked quietly. There was a grunt that Hal knew to be a signal of admission.

Hunter was lounging in the middle of a king-size bed beneath black silk sheets, smoking from a large hookah that bubbled on the bedside table. There were two blondes with him, twins from the look of it, probably in their late teens. Both were sleepy and clearly worn out.

"Want a go at my sloppy seconds?" Hunter asked lazily. Hal always thought he looked like Errol Flynn in *Captain Blood*: the heavy gold earring, the long

black hair tied back with a black ribbon, the devilish goatee. No government operative would have been allowed such self-expression in any other time, and few even in these dark days. But Hunter had special dispensation. *You can get away with murder when you're good at what you do*, Hal thought.

"You really are disgusting," he said.

Hunter saw the serious intent in Hal's face and tapped the girls on the shoulder, waving them out of the door. Not bothering to hide their nakedness, they skipped out with a giggle and a backward glance at Hunter.

Hunter noted Hal's disapproval with weary disdain. "In times like this, you've got to celebrate life, have some fun. But you wouldn't understand that—you like wallowing in your misery." He swung his legs out of bed and started to pull on his clothes before pausing with a wrinkled nose. "I need a shower."

"The General wants you to put a team together for a retrieval—"

"That swaggering git always wants something when it's my night off."

"They're going after a couple of those Brothers and Sisters of Dragons."

Hunter raised an eyebrow. "Finally. I was starting to think they were scared of them or something."

"They're beginning to feel backed into a corner. Glenning didn't make it."

"He was a stupid bastard for volunteering." Hunter paced across the sumptuous rugs, stretching his lithe body. A large black tattoo of a snake rose up his spine from somewhere below the waistband of his trousers to the nape of his neck, slithering as the muscles beneath it rippled.

"How can you be so hard-hearted?" Hal protested. "Glenning sacrificed himself for the sake of the country."

Hunter stared at Hal in disbelief. "Don't start falling for the propaganda. It's not good for your health." He pulled on a loose-fitting red silk shirt that masked his hardness with a dandyish air. "Glenning was a drone who jumped through hoops whenever anyone higher up the pecking order shouted at him. That mission was always going to fail. You know that."

"Someone has to try—"

"Yeah?" Hunter shrugged. "Why?"

"We're at war, fighting for the existence of civilisation . . . everything we've achieved—"

"And what have we achieved, exactly?"

"There's no talking to you when you're in this mood." Hal marched to the antique sideboard and poured himself a glass of vintage wine from a crystal decanter. "It shows our resilience as a race that we're still clinging on after all we've endured in recent times. The basic rules of science shown up for what they are—just one way of looking at the world, and not the most important by a long way. Society turned on its head—"

"You say all that as if it's a bad thing." Hunter flopped onto the edge of the bed and pulled on his boots.

"It's amazing that we've managed to establish a new government here in Oxford after what happened in London. We've even got the power back on, instituted some semblance of normality. A year ago, no one would ever have thought that would have been possible."

"You said it yourself—we're clinging on. What's the point in trying to hang on to the old days? They're gone. The way we lived, the things we believed in . . . they're all part of the past. We've been presented with a whole new set of possibilities. We should be reinventing ourselves to live now . . . to create a better world, not just repeat all the old mistakes simply because it makes us feel comfortable."

"It's not that—"

"Yes, it is. We're all terrified of change—especially the big change, death—so we try to pretend that there's some permanence in this world that change can't influence. It's all metaphors and symbols. I thought you were the smart one in this friendship. You know that nothing has meaning on the surface. The surface is just a clue to what's locked underneath—"

"I didn't come here for a philosophical discussion." Hal drained the wine in one go.

"There's no talking to you when you're in this mood," Hunter mocked, but gently. "We've got the chance for a good thing here, but we'll never see the benefits. Do you know why? Human nature. Forget the gods and the monsters—we're our own worst enemies. It's hardwired into us. Someone will come along to fuck things up for the majority, just to get a shot at making more money or gaining more power for themselves. Wait and see."

"Why do you do this, Hunter?" Hal said, hitting back in the only way he knew how.

"What?"

"All the women, the drink, the drugs . . . You're just trying to run away from who you are. Can't face life as the big, scary Hunter. It's childish, you know."

"Yep."

Hal sighed. "Don't you have any self-awareness?"

"Nope."

"That's it, isn't it," Hal said morosely. "I do all the thinking and you do all the doing." He sagged onto the edge of the bed.

Hunter laughed and clapped him heartily across the shoulders. "Come on, let's get tooled up."



While Hunter went to his flat to get a shower, Hal wandered the maze of quiet streets in the ancient quarter between Cornmarket and Longwall streets. In the long shadows cast by the Divinity School and the Bodleian Library, it was possible to imagine he was back before the Fall and that sooner or later he would bump into some students making their way home after a late-night party.

As he rounded onto Catte Street and approached the Radcliffe Camera, he was met by a strange sight. Although it was night, four thrushes sat side by side on a wrought-iron fence, silent and immobile, while a fifth hopped around in a circle on the pavement. Hal came to a halt, curious at the bird's antics, but he was even more surprised when the bird on the pavement appeared to notice him. It hopped up to his foot and stopped before raising its head to stare at him. Hal looked from the strange visitor to the four birds on the fence and back, all of them were staring at him, or so it seemed. He waited for the bird at his feet to fly off, even shook his leg slightly to encourage it, but the longer it remained, the more his curiosity gave way to an unsettled feeling. In the end, he walked off himself. Ten yards away he glanced back. The birds were still where he'd left them, but they had turned to watch his departure.

Hal laughed it off, but the unnerving sensation clung to him like autumn fog. Soon after, it was compounded. On the first storey of a building on the High Street, five windows in a row were lit, but one had a blind half pulled down. Further on, four bicycles leaned against a wall, while a fifth lay on its side in the gutter.

Coincidence, his rational mind insisted, yet an age-old instinctive part of him couldn't help feeling slightly uneasy at this pattern manifesting itself in the most mundane things. His mind conjured an image of the universe as one living creature, breathing slowly like a man at rest, an entity that had, at that moment, chosen to notice him in particular, and to communicate some incomprehensible but vital message to him alone. Shaking his head at the odd turn his thoughts had taken, he continued along the main thoroughfare.

Suddenly, a man lurched out of a darkened alley. His tattered clothes were filthy from a life lived on the streets, his skin so black with ingrained dirt that his eyes stared out wide and white, his hair and beard a matted mane of mud-stained grey and black. He reeked of engine oil and urine.

Hal stepped back, instantly on his guard. The man held out one filthy hand, fingers splayed. Four stood erect; the thumb was missing, a ragged sore seeping at the joint.

Involuntarily, Hal ran, not stopping until the comforting lights of Magdalen burned off his fear. He told himself how stupid he'd been, but nothing would have convinced him to return to the dark maze of ageless streets that night.



Hunter sat at the back of the auditorium, alert and serious. Hal knew it was only a front for his superiors. Six other men were scattered around the rows, waiting silently, all of them former SAS or SBS. Their cold inhumanity scared Hal; they were prepared to do things no normal member of society would consider. Hunter always insisted Hal go easy on them: he was allowed to sleep peacefully because men like them existed. Hal could see the logic of that argument, but in truth he didn't think Hunter really liked any of them either.

The General stood at the front, relaxed and confident. Hal knew that the military had been pushing for more direct involvement in day-to-day events for a while, but they had always been restrained by the intelligence corps and the politicians who feared showing the government's hand too soon. But the power base appeared to be shifting in the eternally baffling, subtle machinations that thrived in the shadowy corridors of the government headquarters.

"Some background," the General began. "The mission on which you are about to embark is to seek out and capture one of the group known as the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons. You will recall the first stories of their appearance at the time of the Fall. We discounted them as rumours and concentrated on a traditional response to the threat facing us." His face grew grim. "A mistake. The Brothers and Sisters of Dragons were instrumental in preventing a catastrophic defeat. The powers arrayed against us were held back. Some—the worst—fled after the Battle of London. Others adopted a watching brief, but are still a threat."

"They did us a favour," said a man at the front, his face marred by severe acne scars.

"Our advisors tell us that they are some kind of champions chosen by the . . . forces that are active in the world at present." Hal could see that the General was uncomfortable dealing with concepts that were alien to him. *Forces. Gods. Magic.* "They are empowered by some kind of subtle energy that runs through the planet. It gives them certain abilities . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Maybe it doesn't." Hunter smiled a wry smile. "Maybe they're just better than everyone else. You don't have to be Special Forces to be a *champion*."

The General stifled a hint of irritation and continued, "One of the abilities they do have is to cross the barrier that separates us from our enemy's homeland. If we want to strike at them where it hurts, *we* need that ability. Our advisors suggest this energy may be intelligent in some way, that these champions appear where or when they're most needed. Take that as you will. Sounds like a load of bunkum to me, but it doesn't have any impact on the mission at hand. All you

need to know is that a new group of Five is being formed. Two have so far been identified.”

“How dangerous are they?” the acne man asked. “The Five who fought at the Battle of London sound like nutters.”

“Dangerous is a good word for them, Grieg. Particularly so in the case of these two,” the General replied. “The first one goes by the name of Mallory, Christian name unknown. He’s a mercenary. Most recently, he sold himself to the Church.”

A sneering murmur ran through the assembled men except Hunter and Hal, who listened intently.

“Don’t make assumptions or you’ll pay the price,” the General warned. The Church—what remains of it—is based in Salisbury Cathedral, where they’re training up a new bunch of Knights Templar. Forget your history. These are fighting men. Hard. Well suited to the times we live in. Well trained in sword-play, archery, survival techniques. And they had a good teacher: Blaine.”

“*The Blaine?*” Grieg asked.

The General nodded. “Indeed. Bloody Blaine of Belfast. So don’t underestimate Mallory. If you don’t have your wits about you, you’ll be dead before you’re within three feet of him.”

“Is he travelling with the other one?” Hunter asked.

“Yes. A woman.” The General checked his notes. “Sophie Tallent. Special abilities: she can manipulate that subtle energy in some way, has certain supernatural powers . . .”

Hal found himself wondering what chance they had if the military couldn’t accept the profound changes that had taken place across the world. The supernatural was a fact of life: strange creatures, bizarre powers, hidden rules. Everyone knew it; they’d all seen the signs—much of the evidence lay in the cells of the high-security wing below Brasenose College, not far from the lab where Glenning had died.

“Are they lying low?” Hunter’s face had a strange expression that Hal couldn’t quite read.

“They don’t realise that we’re aware of them,” the General replied, “let alone searching for them. They should be relatively easy to locate. Our last reconnaissance placed them somewhere in the vicinity of Sparkford in Somerset. It appears they’re searching for something, though without much luck so far.”

“Can we use the chopper?”

Hal flinched at Hunter’s request. With no new fuel being produced, vehicle use was rarely sanctioned, but the General acceded without hesitation. Hunter winked at Hal.

“Get them back here as quickly as you can. Get them back in a state we can use,” the General said firmly. “And don’t come back empty-handed.”



Outside Magdalen's main college buildings, Hal waited for Hunter in St. John's Quadrangle, in the shadow of the porter's lodge. Hunter had stayed behind after the General's departure to brief his men, which Hal knew usually meant threatening them with genital removal in the event of failure. Hunter called it *motivational therapy*; Hal wasn't wholly sure it was a joke.

"I've got a funny feeling about the way things are going at the moment," Hal said when Hunter emerged.

For once, Hunter's response wasn't glib. "We're at a turning point, no mistaking." He forced a grin. "Let's hope the leadership are up to what's expected of them."

"You don't have much time for anyone, do you?"

"Not really. That way you never feel let down." He cracked his knuckles uneasily. "I can't get this damned REM song out of my head."

"The one about the end of the world?"

"You'd think, wouldn't you? No, another one, an older one."

Hunter paused as Samantha emerged from the buildings that housed the staff living quarters. She'd showered after her run and her hair was still damp. Her face lit up with an open smile when she saw Hal, but became instantly guarded when her eyes fell on Hunter.

"Hmm. Fresh and squeaky clean," he said as she approached.

Samantha's eyes flashed. "I gather you're about to depart on an extremely dangerous, possibly lethal mission. Don't hang around here on my behalf."

"Samantha, you're the reason I'll be back. You give my life meaning." He winked at Hal. "See you, mate. Put the champagne on ice."

Samantha watched until Hunter had disappeared from view, and then turned to Hal and said, "He gives sleazy a bad name."

"You know you like him really," Hal joked and was surprised by Samantha's indignation.

"How can you say that?" Her tone was unduly sharp.

"I was just—"

"Well, don't." She softened. "Listen, have you heard the latest gossip?" Hal allowed himself to be dragged conspiratorially into an alcove. "The security forces have captured a god."

"What?" Hal said, suddenly uneasy, although he didn't quite know why. "I don't believe it."

"It's true. They used some super-secret weapon, apparently. Anyway, he's been brought in for interrogation—"

"Brought here? Is that wise?"

Samantha looked at him, puzzled.

“I know we’ve got secure cells—”

“They’re already holding some powerful things down there,” Samantha said.

“I know. But not a god. How can they contain a power like that?”

“He’s not a *real* god—”

“You know what they did to London. Besides, even if we could hold it, that’s got to attract the attention of all its kind. Do we really want all that coming down on our heads?”

A flicker of disappointment crossed Samantha’s face. It stung Hal harder than he would have expected. “We’re at war, Hal,” she said gently. “We have to take risks, for the sake of everyone.” She gave his arm a reassuring squeeze, as if he was scared for his own safety. “Don’t worry. If I hear any more I’ll let you know.” She flashed him a smile and headed toward the refectory for a late-night meal.

Hal stood in the silent quadrangle for a long moment, turning over what she had said. He wished Hunter was still around; he needed to discuss it with someone. It was too big to deal with himself. But there was no one else and, with a mounting sense of disquiet, he headed out into the night.

After everything that had happened that evening, Hal felt distinctly out of sorts. Glenning’s death had shaken him profoundly, and the random numerical manifestations of five minus one still haunted him. He tried to pretend that his mind had only noticed the similar numbers because it was already troubled, but he couldn’t shake an overwhelming feeling that it meant something, although he couldn’t begin to divine what.

Yet he found no ease in the moon-shadows of the Deer Park. The night was too hot and appeared to be growing warmer by the minute; his sweat-sodden shirt clung to his back. But it wasn’t the temperature that continued to turn the screw on his psyche. With mounting disorientation, he looked around at the cityscape visible beyond the ancient rooftops. It was like looking at the city through a heat haze: a transparent curtain of shimmering sapphire light rippled back and forth, and through it Oxford appeared transformed. The medieval buildings and their modern counterparts merged and flowed into more fantastic structures: towers reached up into the night, some constructed from gleaming blue-white stone, others seemingly of brass and gold; lofty-roofed halls and gargoyle-riven battlements; arching bridges; steeples and spires and domes.

The illusion came and went with every eye blink, fantasy and reality, reality and fantasy, so that in the end he couldn’t tell on which side of the line he stood. With it came a tingling in his fingers and toes, energy drawn from the ground itself, curling up his spine like the snake that slithered across Hunter’s back.

Hal's breath was taken away with wonder, while his rational mind ran wild in search of understanding.

Yet he was distracted after only a few seconds by a figure emerging from the haze as if it was slowly gaining solidity from a phantom existence. It was a giant of a man at least eight feet tall. His long black hair and beard and the dark coals of his eyes reminded Hal oddly of the disfigured tramp he had seen earlier that evening. Though his height was daunting, it was the man's clothes that instantly set him apart. He wore a rough brown shift fastened at the waist by a broad belt. His left forearm was bound with a thong, from which several malicious-looking hooks gleamed.

Hal thought it prudent to retreat to the safety of the buildings as quickly as possible, but was sickened to discover that his legs wouldn't obey his thoughts. Yet despite the stranger's foreboding appearance, Hal felt no sense of threat. Instead, it was almost as if he was in a dream, watching the scene through someone else's eyes.

"I have searched for you across the worlds, for time upon time upon time," the giant began, "and now I find myself summoned to the place where you stand. Existence weaves a pattern that none of us can see."

"Who are you?" Hal asked. The taste of iron filings numbed his mouth.

"I am the Caretaker. I am the lamplighter. In the darkest of the dark, I ensure that a single flame burns. In the midst of chaos, I ensure that the home is kept safe and secure."

Something supernatural, Hal's sluggish brain thought. *One of the gods?*

"Are you causing all this?" Hal gestured toward the shimmering phantom city that kept overlaying itself on the Oxford skyline.

"No. But it is serendipitous."

Slowly, the Caretaker's words wormed their way into Hal's consciousness. "You're looking for me?"

"I come with a warning of greatest import: something has noticed you."

"What?" Hal's mind fumbled for meaning.

The Caretaker raised one huge hand and pointed up to the sprinkling of stars. "Out there, on the edge of Existence. It has seen you . . . and it is coming."

Hal stared dumbly into the deep black depths of space. "What's coming?"

The blue haze began to fade and the true outline of Oxford started to emerge into sharp relief once more. When Hal looked back at the Caretaker, the giant had retreated several paces, though Hal had not been aware of him walking away.

"It will be here soon now . . . very soon," the Caretaker continued in a low, echoing voice. "It may even be here already. You must be prepared. The Brothers and Sisters of Dragons must be united. But know this: one of the Five has already fallen. And without the correct number their effectiveness is dimmed." He stared

toward the few lamps still burning in the windows of Magdalen. “There is little hope. Soon even the last light may be extinguished. And then my job shall be done.”

The Caretaker continued to fade, drifting across the grass, becoming more insubstantial the further from Hal he got.

“War . . .” The giant’s words were breaking up. “There will come an ending.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Hal called.

The Caretaker’s response was lost to the night breeze. A second later, he vanished and the blue haze along with him. Reality was hard and fast all around. But inside Hal the dread that had been mounting all night had now crystallised.

He had been noticed. And something was coming.